

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 DACCA 02854 051205Z
ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 EA-10 IO-13 ISO-00 EB-08 AID-05 HA-05
OMB-01 TRSE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
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P R 051110Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY DACCA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9191
INFO USMISSION GENEVA
AMEMBASSY RANGOON

C O N F I D E N T I A L DACCA 2854

DEPT PASS AID/ASIA AND AID/OFDA

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR BM BG SREF
SUBJECT: MUSLIM REFUGEES FROM BURMA

REF: DACCA 2700

SUMMARY. FOREIGN SECRETARY TABARAK HUSAIN, CALLED
IN THE AMBASSADOR ON MAY 5 TO BRIEF HIM FURTHER REGARDING
THE REFUGEE SITUATION ON THE BORDER. HUSAIN WHO HAD
VISITED THE REFUGEE AREA ON MAY 2-3, SAID THAT PRESIDENT
ZIA HAD TOLD HIM THAT THE REFUGEES MUST RETURN TO BURMA
AND THAT ZIA WOULD DO WHATEVER NECESSARY TO ACHIEVE THAT
OBJECT. HUSAIN SAID THAT AS OF TWO TO THREE DAYS AGO
SOME 40,000 REFUGEES HAD BEEN REGISTERED IN CAMPS BUT
THAT THE NUMBER MAY NOW EXCEED 60 THOUSAND. A WORLD FOOD
PROGRAM STAFF MEMBER VISITED THE REGION ON APRIL 30 AND
REPORTED THE PRESENCE OF 30,000 REGISTERED REFUGEES.
UNDP DIRECTOR ZAGORIN IS ALSO PLANNING TO VISIT THE AREA.
END SUMMARY.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 DACCA 02854 051205Z

1. HUSAIN MAINTAINED THAT THE BENGALI MUSLIM ETHNIC
MINORITY HAD BEEN IN BURMA IN 1948 WHEN THAT COUNTRY
BECAME INDEPENDENT. IT CONSISTED OF THREE GROUPS:
THOSE DESCENDED FROM VERY EARLY ARAB TRADERS; THE
DECENDENTS OF A MOGHUL ARMY WHICH TOOK REFUGE THERE
IN THE 17TH CENTURY; AND PEOPLES WHO MIGRATED TO BURMA
DURING THE BRITISH INDIA DAYS WHEN BURMA WAS A PART OF

BRITISH INDIA AND THERE WAS FREE MOVEMENT OF POPULATIONS. HUSAIN MAINTAINED THAT THE BURMESE SYSTEM OF BASING CITIZENSHIP ON POSSESSION OF A CERTIFICATE WAS UNJUST; OTHER NATIONS CONSIDER BIRTH, DURATION OF RESIDENCE, AND OTHER FACTORS AS DETERMINING AND THEY RESORT TO LEGAL PROCESS PRIOR TO DEPORTATION. HE CLAIMED THAT ALL OF THE OLDER REFUGEES HE HAD INTERVIEWED HAD SAID THEY HAD BEEN BORN IN BURMA.

2. THE FOREIGN SECRETARY REPORTED THAT THE BANGLADESH AMBASSADOR IN RANGOON HAS DISCUSSED THE REFUGEE SITUATION WITH NE WIN AND SAN YU, BOTH OF WHOM MAINTAINED THAT BURMESE AUTHORITIES WERE ONLY CARRYING OUT AN INSPECTION OF REGISTRATION CERTIFICATES. IN VIEW OF THE LACK OF PROGRESS IN DISCUSSIONS AT THAT HIGH LEVEL, THE FOREIGN SECRETARY SAID HE HAD DECIDED NOT TO VISIT RANGOON FOR DISCUSSIONS. HE REPORTED THAT FOLLOWING HIS VISIT TO THE FRONTIER HE HAD DISCUSSED THE REFUGEE PROBLEMS WITH PRESIDENT ZIA WHO HAD DECIDED THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH SHOULD PROVIDE TEMPORARY FOOD AND SHELTER "AND WHATEVER THE U.S. AND INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES MIGHT PROVIDE" TO THE REFUGEES BUT THAT THEY MUST RETURN TO BURMA. THE PRESIDENT HAD TAKEN THE POSITION THAT IF THIS MEANT "DIFFICULTIES ON THE BORDER" HE WAS PREPARED TO ACCEPT THAT. ACCORDING TO THE FOREIGN SECRETARY, HE ALLUDED TO HIS PARTICIPATION IN MILITARY ACTIVITIES AGAINST INDIA AND

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 DACCA 02854 051205Z

PAKISTAN AND SAID HE WAS PREPARED FOR ANY DIFFICULTY WITH BURMA. ACCORDING TO HUSAIN, A MAJOR CONTROVERSY WAS BUILDING WITHIN BANGLADESH AND HE THEREFORE FORESAW A DIFFICULT PERIOD AHEAD.

3. THE BDG, SAID HUSAIN, CONSIDERS THE EVICTION OF MUSLIM BENGALIS FROM BURMA TO BE A GRAVE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS. HE SAID THE BDG HAD DECIDED NOT TO MAKE THE MIGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUE (APPARENTLY MEANING THAT THE BDG WOULD NOT RAISE IT IN INTERNATIONAL FORA). HE SAID, HOWEVER THAT IT WOULD WELCOME INTERNATIONAL INTEREST IN THE QUESTION AND "EXPECTED" ITS FRIENDS TO SPEAK TO BURMA IN REGARD TO THE VIOLATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE REFUGEES.

4. IN RESPONSE TO THE AMBASSADOR'S QUESTION, HUSAIN REPORTED THAT AS OF TWO OR THREE DAYS AGO THERE WERE SOME 40,000 REFUGEES REGISTERED IN CAMPS AND THAT THAT NUMBER NOW EXCEEDS 60,000. (A WORLD FOOD PROGRAM STAFF MEMBER FOUND 30,000 ON APRIL 30.) THE REFUGEES ARE LOCATED IN FIVE CAMPS IN THE CHITTAGONG DISTRICT AND THREE IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS. HUSAIN AGAIN

INVITED THE AMBASSADOR TO VISIT THE REGION (THE POLITICAL COUNSELOR AND THE DEFENSE ATTACHE HAVE RECEIVED SIMILAR INVITATIONS) AND REPORTED THAT UNDP DIRECTOR ZAGORIN WAS PLANNING TO VISIT.

5. IN RESPONSE TO THIS PRESENTATION, THE AMBASSADOR STUCK TO THE LINE PROPOSED IN REFTEL: WE DEEPLY REGRET THE HUMAN SUFFERING FROM THE MIGRATION REGARDLESS OF ITS CAUSE: THE DESPUTE CAN BE SETTLED ONLY BETWEEN BURMA AND BANGLADESH AND WE HOPE THEY STAY IN COMMUNICATION; AND WE BELIEVE IT GOOD THAT REPRESENTATIVES OF INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES CAN VIEW THE CONDITION OF THE REFUGEES RESULTING FROM THEIR MIGRATION AND THAT WE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN HEARING OF THEIR FINDINGS. ALL EMBASSY OFFICERS HAVE SIDE-CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 DACCA 02854 051205Z

STEPPED INVITATIONS TO VISIT THE BORDER AREA.

6. COMMENT: WITH THE PRESS VIVIDLY PLAYING UP THE CAUSES OF THE MIGRATION AND POLITICIANS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF NEWLY-OPENED ATMOSPHERE TO CHIME IN, CONSIDERABLE INTERNAL HEAT IS BEING GENERATED ON THE REFUGEE ISSUE. ALTHOUGH THE FOREIGN SECRETARY ALLUDED BRIEFLY TO BOTH THE POSSIBILITY OF U.S. RELIEF ASSISTANCE AND OF U.S. INTERVENTION WITH THE BURMESE, HE MADE NO DIRECT AND EXPLICIT REQUEST. WE NOW HAVE CONFIRMATION FROM ONE INDEPENDENT SOURCE OF THE PRESENCE OF LARGE NUMBERS OF REFUGEES AND WE SHOULD HAVE ADDITIONAL RELIABLE INFORMATION FROM ZAGORIN SOON. IF THE INFLUX CONTINUES, WE ANTICIPATE WE WILL OBTAIN A MORE SPECIFIC REQUEST FOR RELIEF ASSISTANCE AND FOR INTERVENTION WITH THE BURMESE. THE PRESENCE OF A GERMAN TELEVISION TEAM IN THE AREA YESTERDAY MAY ATTRACT INTERNATIONAL PRESS ATTENTION. WE BELIEVE ANY DECISION ON RELIEF ASSISTANCE SHOULD AWAIT A FURTHER GOVERNMENT REQUEST AND THE REPORT OF THE ZAGORIN VISIT. WE LEAVE TO THE DEPARTMENT AND RANGOON WHETHER ANY USEFUL PURPOSE MIGHT BE SERVED BY FURTHER DISCUSSION WITH THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT.
SCHNEIDER

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